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ARCHITECTURE FROM THE DOGS …

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‘The act of making space, place and architecture is contentious from the start.’

There's a well-known Irish idiom that begins, 'even the dogs in the street know'. It's used when something is blindingly obvious, yet officially unacknowledged. This chapter draws out, contextualises and illustrates some of the obvious – yet unofficial – issues that I have had to consider while teaching and researching at both schools of architecture in Belfast.

Northern Ireland has long been a critical, conflictual context. Thirty years of violent conflict, known as the 'troubles', ended in 1998 following a peace agreement. [216] Whilst the current period is defined as 'post-conflict', it's argued that conflict has not disappeared and instead is manifest in other, transformed, ways. The legacy of conflict is tangible, the context remains challenging, and the term 'pre-peace' seems a more accurate description of the prevailing condition. [217]

Rarely does this practical experience of life and work in a conflictual context enter mainstream architectural discussion. Partly out of the urge to 'move on' and normalise, and partly because it is difficult to imagine what one could reasonably learn from such a negative experience that might speak to forward-thinking design. Instead, we 'put our heads down and carry on'. [218]

However, such a strategy poses two problems. Firstly, whilst the physical effects of conflict may be less visible, the prejudices and emotional damage continue across generations and indeed often increase. [219] Secondly, and somewhat conversely, practitioners know that conflict and challenging contexts are actually at the centre of most creative action. Where they don't exist naturally, we artificially 'limit the palette' or create dichotomous concepts to draw out innovative responses.

Having grown up during the 'troubles', I understood on returning that there were challenges beyond the obvious, i.e. the physical scarring of the built environment and Belfast's geographical isolation from mainstream architectural discourse, so I looked for indicators in government policy that conditions were improving. Whilst I profoundly believe in bottom-up movements, I know how policy can block and/or support grass-roots efforts. The most obvious indicator was the development of Northern Ireland's first architecture policy. Even though its ambition was limited, and targets ill-defined, it still created a space for discussing what architecture might offer. [220] But a series of policies called 'Unlocking Creativity' piqued my interest more. Knowing that policy makers in NI considered creativity important within the *heavy* realities of a post-conflict context was intriguing, forcing me to consider what an architecture school in a post-conflict context might be. [221]

In my previous post at Sheffield, a group of us had been working on the relationship between reality and creativity whilst rebuilding a first-year curriculum, called 'Building Clouds'. [222] Back in Northern Ireland I was able to apply the ideas with more purpose. The aim was not to separate creativity and reality, but rather to discuss and recognise their interdependence. Projects such as 'Designers, Kings and Assemblers' and

'Room Archaeology' were imaginative yet grounded. [223] More importantly they completed with a formal period of reflection on what was learnt and achieved. As I wrote at the time, 'If we don't purposefully construct space for reflection that allows for alternate and conflictual readings of the same experience or idea to emerge then I don't believe we can call ourselves pedagogues. Our role is not to help people towards our understanding of architectural practice, rather, their own.'

Simultaneously, I led a research project that took 'Unlocking Creativity' as its starting point. [224] We interviewed creative practitioners across a range of practices, all working within contentious communities. [225] Surprisingly, they seemed positively challenged by the difficulties faced, determined to make sense of and transform conflict into something *else*. As Teddy Cruz puts it, in regard to architectural practice: 'the future of cities today depends less on buildings but more on the fundamental reorganisation of socio-economic relations ... the best ideas for this renewal will not come from enclaves of economic power and abundance, but from sectors of conflict and scarcity. There an urgent imagination can really inspire us to rethink urban growth today.' [226] Conflict then is not just another site of praxis but a vital space of creativity and learning for architecture as a whole.

But let's consider in more depth the effect of conflict on people, and in particular on their creativity and the various forms it takes as society evolves out of the 'shadow space'. [227]

Alongside the visible degradation of space, there is evidence that conflict also has long-term consequences for a society's psychological well-being. [228] We can assume therefore that creativity takes a blow. The poet Gerald Dawe elucidates: 'For generations Belfast has been viewed in various intellectual and artistic circles as anathema to the creative spirit.' [229] One tangible indicator of the paucity of creativity is Northern Ireland's low level of entrepreneurial activity. [230] Due in part perhaps to an economy and culture heavily reliant on the public sector, the origin may also lie in society's generally low confidence and dulled ambition. [231] Conflict removes the individual's voice, deadens the practice of discourse, and diminishes vision. [232]

During periods of threat or violence, creativity manifests itself in less visible forms of self-expression. Indeed, Northern Ireland has world-class poets, writers, playwrights and musicians. These forms of creativity are transient, non-locatable and self-sustaining; they can be tucked under the arm as the instigator hastily exits via the back door, often exposing and indeed frustrating those in power.

In contrast, the act of making space, place and architecture is always visible and contentious from the start. In a highly territorialised society building is both intimidatory and vulnerable to intimidation. Architecture and urban design are multi-agency, large-scale processes. They rely on patronage, even if those offering it are corrupt or extreme. In such contexts

architecture typically comes in two forms. It is either a privileged, well-financed product, existing in a bubble, untouched by context. Or, more typically, it is under-resourced and derivative, i.e. influenced not by the surrounding context but rather the context it wishes it were in. (In the case of NI this means London.) Consequently such mainstream approaches develop a form of mental illness: detached, delusionary, lamenting and finally, dementing.

One architectural process that may be more effective in this context is that of the small-scale, co-created, low-cost, temporary spatial intervention. A form almost the antithesis of mainstream architecture yet often witnessed in schools of architecture in 'live projects'. Indeed live projects have become a key tool in bridging the creativity–reality gap in Northern Ireland. For example, 'Street Society' at Belfast's Queen's University involves small teams of students engaged in live projects for external organisations. 'In a one week period they bring their research, analysis and propositional skills into the wider community.' [233] Such processes can also be considered as an act of 'socio-spatial rehearsal': architecture in the process of becoming, still open for discussion and as yet inconclusive. [234]

But in the conservative culture of Northern Ireland it's sometimes difficult to generate and sustain radical pedagogies within the academy. Architecture as autonomous 'designed' product remains the revered discourse – though things *are* changing. Within this conservative context, I diverted pedagogical interests and live project tactics into *street level pedagogy*: long-term projects working with PS^2 and local communities at those places where the dogs meet. [235]

PS^2, a Belfast arts organisation, focuses on curating people, place and creativity in post-conflict contexts, purposefully locating projects in areas of low resource. The ambition is to make interesting and provocative work, while also investigating and developing practice that empowers people within their own environments, creating moments of community coherence. Examples of projects include 'Up Down', one of a series in Ballykinler, a rural village adjacent to a British Army camp. Or 'Temporary Places', a project on an interface in North Belfast that combines art with agriculture, reclaiming segregated areas for a shared neighbourhood. [236] All projects are small-scale and low-cost, involving local communities, artists, architects, theorists and students.

A combined understanding of transformative pedagogies and managing creative actions becomes useful in this context. The project is shaped as much by who's in the classroom and who's learning what, as it is by the endeavour to act spatially. Spatial actions, at times crude, provide spaces to ask questions, challenge perceptions and trial accepted positions, not only in relation to the world around us but also to the individual worlds within us. Such practice asks for patience, and for the abandonment of thoughts of an end point. Turning an idea or feeling into something tangible, able to be discussed and adjusted, brings about development and transformation in the places one least expects. (And strangely,

witnessing these processes has re-sensitised me to the transformations students undergo within architectural education.)

There is nervousness around the concept of 'transformation' in Northern Ireland. When Arts Council of Northern Ireland introduced 're-imaging' initiatives, communities asked why they needed to be 'transformed', concerned that creative projects were used as a form of socio-political manipulation. But the transformation that people experience through a creative process is highly individual, often accompanied by growth in self-identity and a wish to be heard. This is more akin to self-politicisation and empowerment and unlikely to be susceptible to external manipulation. Transformation can be as simple as connecting people to their stories, their place and their voice. It can give people confidence to effect positive change; to overcome difficulties, as creative practitioners do, through imaginative, proactive and self-determined means. When discussing this in terms of communities, we should remind ourselves of the transformative powers of education when focus is placed on the development of an individual's creative practice and less on architectural outcomes.

This phase of Northern Ireland's development resembles a design challenge. Indeed, design theory and peace building are interesting comparators. The language of peace, which has shifted from 'solving conflict' to 'managing' and 'transforming conflict', challenges us to consider design less as a problem-solving process and more as problem management.[237] In Belfast, as in other places, spatial interventions may be part of the toolkit but the more meaningful journey is towards reconfigured social relationships, with architectural practice *solidifying around* and supporting that process. We need to reverse our intellectual withdrawal to the leafy suburbs and respond to Dovey's call for architects to 'enter into the difficulty of things, resisting the desire to remain about the fray, the illusion of autonomy.'

I remain concerned that the conditions and culture for creative architectural practice are not yet conducive. Schools of architecture have a role to play here. We have to actually talk and engage in 'civic conversations' about this 'issue': the condition of post-conflict and its relationship to architecture.

We can clarify the variety of existing and potential practices that students can choose to engage in, valorising alternative practices alongside mainstream. A richer holistic network not only allows students and architects to plot their own practice journey but, crucially, helps them understand the interconnectedness – indeed interdependence – of architectural practices. No one practice has the answer, but a networked body of practitioners is better able to influence, take collective responsibility and 'enter into the difficulty of things'. That network has to include both universities with their recognised expertise in conflict studies. To support this, we have recently developed a cross-disciplinary Masters in Sustainable Practices in the Built Environment, offering streams looking at topics ranging from critical spatial process and contested space to ethics and economics.

The effects of conflict and contested space cover the globe. There are edges, boundaries, voids and critical contexts where architects can help transcend difficulties through design thinking, bringing their unique professional understanding of the latent potency – and potentials – between people and space, to propose alternative futures. My hope would be that learning from Belfast and the dogs on the street can contribute to that process.

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[216] Like many terms in Northern Ireland, the word 'troubles' is contested – being viewed as a diminution of the nature and impact of conflict.

[217] Ruth Morrow (2012) Epilogue: Lessons from the Peripheral, in *Peripheries,* eds R. Morrow and M. G. Abdelmonem, Architectural Humanities Research Association Series, London/New York: Taylor and Francis.

[218] Neil Hanlon, Divine Comedy in the song Sunrise, writes about the experience of growing up in NI, repeating the refrain: "So I put my head down and carried on".

[219] The number of peace walls and marches has increased since the peace agreement in 1998.

[220] Arts Council Northern Ireland published *Architecture and the Built Environment for Northern Ireland, Policies, Strategies and Actions* in 2003 informing the first architecture policy for Northern Ireland in 2006.

[221] Cross-departmental policies aimed at 'Unlocking Creativity' were rolled out between 2000 and 2004.

[222] See (a) 'Building Clouds Drifting Walls', p. 5, http://buildingclouds.blogspot.co.uk/2007/05/building-clouds-page-5reality-versus.html (accessed 11 August 2014); (b) R. Morrow, J. Torrington and R. Parnell, 'Reality versus Creativity' in *CEBE Transactions*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, December 2004, pp. 91–99; (c) R. Morrow, 'Building Clouds Drifting Walls: architectural pedagogy', in *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics And Poetics of Space*, ed. D. Petrescu, London: Routledge, 2007.

[223] http://buildingclouds.blogspot.co.uk/

[224] Creative Transformations, AHRC Project (2008), University of Ulster.

[225] Ruth Morrow, Doris Rohr and Kerstin Mey (2008) *Creative Transformations: Conversations on Determination, Risk, Failure and Unquantifiable Success*, Belfast: University of Ulster.

[226] http://www.designboom.com/architecture/teddy-cruz-political-equator-border-conflict-05-18-2014 (accessed 4 March 2015).

[227] The term 'shadow space' is taken from Ciaran Mackel's 2009 ACNI Troubles Archive Essay 'Impact of the conflict on public space and architecture', p. 14, in reference to the peace walls. It then became part of the title of a joint paper: R. Morrow, C. Mackel and J. Dickson Fitzgerald, 'Beyond the shadow space: architecture as a professional and creative process; during and post-conflict' in *Journal of Architecture* Vol. 16, No. 1, 2011.

[228] 'Impact of the Northern Ireland Conflict on Health and Well-Being' in *Equality And Inequalities In Health And Social Care In Northern Ireland*, 2003, and *Segregated Lives Social Division, Sectarianism and Everyday Life in Northern Ireland,* eds J. Hamilton, U. Hansson, J. Bell and S. Toucas, Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research, 2009.

[229] Gerald Dawe (2003) The revenges of the heart: Belfast and the poetics of space, in *The Cities of Belfast,* eds N. Allen and A. Kelly (eds), Dublin: Four Courts Press, pp. 199–210.

[230] M. Hart (2007) *GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) UK: Northern Ireland Summary*, Kingston University: Small Business Research Centre.

[231] 31% of those in employment in Northern Ireland are employed in the public sector. See Census of Employment Survey Results – Published 31 July 2014, http://www.detini.gov.uk/deti-stats-index/stats-surveys/stats-census-of-employment.htm (accessed 4 March 2015).

[232] Reflected in Seamus Heaney's poem 'Whatever you say, say nothing' (1975) that addressed the insidious oppression of 'casual conversation' during the Troubles.

[233] See http://streetsociety.webs.com/aboutstsoc.htm (accessed 5 March 2015). Also Morrow R and Brown J B (2012) Live Projects as Critical Pedagogies, in *Live Projects: Designing with People*, eds M Dodd, F Harrisson and E. Charlesworth, Melbourne: RMIT Training Pty Ltd.

[234] This thinking has emerged from recent research into 'improvisation and architecture' in reflection on the socio-spatial practices of PS^2, first presented at Colloquium 'Translating Improvisation: Beyond Disciplines, Beyond Borders', Sonic Arts Centre, Queens University Belfast, May 2014.

[235] See http://www.pssquared.org (accessed 5 March 2015) and Morrow R (2007) Street Level Pedagogy, in *Space Shuttle*, *Six Projects of Urban Creativity and Social Interaction*, eds P Mutschler and R Morrow, Belfast: PS^2.

[236] http://www.pssquared.org/TemporaryPlaces.php (accessed 5 March 2015) and http://temporaryplaces.org (accessed 5 March 2015).

[237] Police officers who came to investigate a minor sectarian attack on our home (2012) spoke of being unable to 'solve' such issues; rather they aimed to manage and hoped to transform them!